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ABSTRACT

Many studies on occupational stress have examined the buffering effects on stress of different variables. This study hypothesized that self-esteem support would buffer the effects of job stress on depressive symptoms. Subjects were 131 business administration students who were also permanently employed. Subjects completed questionnaires three times with a one-month period between administrations. The reassurance of social worth scale from the Social Provision Scale and the revised Daily Hassles Scale were completed at time 2, along with other items. Also completed at times 2 and 3 was a 10-item scale measuring depressive symptoms. Results of a regression analysis indicated that the job stress x self-esteem support interaction significantly predicted later depressive symptoms, with prior depressive symptoms partialled. The findings are supportive of the hypothesis that self-esteem support buffers the impact of job stress, and imply that type of support, rather than amount or source of support may be the important factor in determining the impact of support on job stress. (NB)

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SELF ESTEEM SUPPORT AS A MODERATOR OF THE IMPACT OF JOB STRESS

Robert C. Cummins

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Problem.

Occupational stress has been a topic of significant research for the last two decades, reflecting concern for the detrimental effects that certain organizational and job characteristics may have on the employee and the organization. These stressors are predictive of a number of outcomes including job dissatisfaction, intentions to terminate employment, lower job performance, somatic disturbances and psychological distress. Having discovered numerous relationships between work-role stressors and outcome variables, attention has been directed at variables which may moderate or "buffer" the effects of these stressors. In search of possible moderators, researchers have shown particular interest in the role of social support in the coping process (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985). While most studies have tested the buffering hypothesis using source specific measures of stress such as supervisor (e.g. LaRocco, French, & House, 1980), the present study proposes to test this hypothesis based on type rather than source of support. Specifically, it is hypothesized that self-esteem support will buffer the effects of job stress on depressive symptoms. This hypothesis is a logical extension of conclusions from Cohen & Wills (1985) summary of the literature in which they found that self-esteem support consistently functioned as a buffer of personal stress.

Method.

One hundred and thirty-one business administration students at a metropolitan university in southwestern United States participated in

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the study for course credit. There were 79 men and 52 women ranging in age from 20 to 50 years (mean age = 29.2 years) all of whom were permanently employed. Participants completed questionnaires at 3 different times separated by one month. At time 2, they completed (among other items) the reassurance of social worth scale from the Social Provision Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987).

At time 2, participants responded to the revised Daily Hassles Scale (Delongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988) which includes 7 items concerned with daily hassles at work. These items have been shown to be related to job satisfaction (Cummins, 1989). At time 2, participants also completed a 10 item scale measuring depressive symptoms (Ilfeld, 1976). This scale was specifically designed for survey use and validated with a probability sample of 2299 non-patient adults. This latter scale was readministered at time 3, thus allowing an assessment of change in symptoms over the one month period separating the two measurements.

Results.

In order to test the possible buffering effects of reassurance of self worth on the impact of job stress on depressive symptoms, a hierarchical regression analysis was employed. In this analysis, level of depressive symptoms (time 3) was the dependent variable. Depressive symptoms at time 2 was entered as the first predictor, followed by job stress and self-esteem (reassurance of self worth) support. Next the crossproducts between symptoms (time 2) and stress and between symptoms (time 2) and support were entered in order to test for possible confounding interactions with the covariant (prior symptoms). Finally, the stress x support crossproduct was entered representing the

hypothesized interaction effect.

Results of this regression analysis indicate that the job stress x self esteem support interaction significantly predicts later depressive symptoms, with prior depressive symptoms partialled ($\Delta R^2 = .041$, $p \leq .005$). Following the predicted values approach (Cohen & Cohen, 1975), the graph of the estimated regression (for high and low levels of support) of job stress on depressive symptoms is supportive of the buffering hypothesis (figure 1).

Conclusion.

The statistically significant interaction supports the hypothesis that self-esteem support buffers the impact of job stress. The implications of these results is that type of support, rather than amount or source of support may be the important issue concerning whether such support diminishes the impact of stressors, i.e. aids coping in response to occupational stress.

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Figure 1. Illustration of two-way interaction between ESTEEM SUPPORT and JOB STRESS. High and low values of support represent one SD above and below the mean.